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Chapter 11

Marriage, Birth, and Death

Marriage

000 In this chapter we shall review all aspects of marriage throughout Mossi country. The customs are the same everywhere, ranging from the marriage of girls reared in the household of the naba to the institution of concubinage. We shall first deal with the most common forms of marriage, then discuss the matter of bride price, and finally conclude with a discussion of the social status of the Moaga woman.

582 Girls are married between the ages of seventeen and nineteen. With certain rare exceptions, a girl of sixteen or eighteen is never sent to her husband. Such an age is considered very unfavorable for child-bearing, and it is even thought that children whose mothers are too young will not survive.

Young men marry between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. [172]

562 Marriage of a girl reared in the household of a naba. Girls born of the marriage of a woman given to a former servitor by either province or canton chiefs became by right the property of the latter. 584 These girls are taken from their parents when they are old enough to do some work and are entrusted by the naba to his wives. They are henceforth regarded as betrothed to the naba and are obliged to submit to all of the conditions of servitude which are imposed on the other wives.

When they reach marriageable age, they may be given, without either their own or their parents' consent, to freed servitors or to any individual who may have rendered some service to the naba.

This is the first type of forced marriage.

Marriage of a girl given by her parents. Since the girl is regarded as simply a "thing," a being without volition, she may be promised at birth. Very often gratitude for hospitality or the existence of an old debt is sufficient reason for promising a daughter.

Social Status of the Moaga Woman and Work Assigned to Her

562 The Moaga woman is regarded as a veritable beast of burden. Household duties and the weaving of cotton for her own and her husband's clothes are not her only occupations. [183] She helps her husband cultivate the family field, and she has her own plots for peanuts, beans, etc.

She endures wretched treatment and must always submit to her husband's whips. She enjoys no consideration whatever and is never called upon to give an opinion. The husband alone rules the home.

[842] If she is so unfortunate as to have no children, she is regarded with scorn. She carries the loads when a move is in progress. A [482] basket and a pyramid of gourds containing her effects and those of her husband are balanced on her head, while the husband canters beside her on a horse or takes his ease on a donkey. If he is afoot, he carries only his quiver, his arrows, his bow, and a club.

To be sure, the Moaga woman may express in unpleasant words her resentment of the maltreatment to which she is subjected, because the Mossi admit that she has no weapon other than her tongue. This is what is meant by the saying, "A woman's mouth is her quiver."

Conjugal Life

834 Interdictions and permissible acts. The couple is forbidden to have sexual relations at the following times.

834 1. For a period of not less than two years and a half after the
853 birth of a child to safeguard the baby's life. Indeed, it is believed that each child comes into the world with its own supply of milk, and if another child were to be conceived during the nursing period, [184] the first would die because the milk of the newborn child would be fatal to him.

834 2. During the menstrual period. The reason for this prohibition
841 is that the husband's fetishes and charms lose part of their "power" after relations at this time.

834 3. A pregnant woman visits her husband during the first six or
843 seven months. All relations then cease until some time after the delivery, as indicated above.

843 4. A pregnant woman must not step over her husband; this would make him ill.

833 5. The sexual act may be performed with impunity in the courtyard of a dwelling (at night). Otherwise, it is expressly forbidden to do it outside the house and in any way other than lying on a mat or Peulh secco, in any case never directly on the ground.

845 6. The delivery will be difficult and complicated if the child was conceived in adultery. If the woman is to be delivered, it is 837 absolutely necessary that she confess the name of her accomplice 847 in the presence of witnesses. In this case, if the husband demands it -- and he always does -- the newborn child is killed by the erring wife immediately after it is born (1). [185]

1. The procedure is as follows. Some young mothers simply twist its neck and strangle it. Others put the baby in a jar of lukewarm water. The baby instinctively drinks and finally drowns.

837 Adultery. Before the arrival of the French, adultery committed 684 by the nakomsé (descendants of naba) was punished by the death of the guilty couple. Among ordinary Mossi, the culprit was simply banished from the family.

However, if the lover was not a relative of the woman's husband, he was forbidden henceforth to come to the village where the woman lived. If he failed to observe this rule, he risked being killed.

837 As a general rule, a Moaga woman takes a lover in a village some distance away from her husband's village and not far from her own. When she asks her husband's permission to visit her family, she profits by the opportunity to spend some time with her lover or to let him know that she is going to her parents' home.

Dissolution of Marriage. Divorce.

586 A divorce may be imposed by a husband who no longer loves his 842 wife, but neither ill-health nor sterility may be invoked for the purpose. In the latter case, it is simply assumed that God does not want the woman to have children. She is often regarded with scorn, but sometimes no attention is paid to her lack of children.

641 as part of the family.

641 2. When a Moaga emigrates and settles permanently in a foreign country, either to take up trading or to study the precepts of Islam. He is forced to abandon his usual customs and to scorn ancestral ways, thus losing his personal status. If he wishes to embrace Islam, he changes his name, and if he should return to his native village, he would no longer try to be identified as a Moaga, whose customs and beliefs he no longer shares and whom he now regards as an inferior.

641 [188] As has been noted, the Moaga woman who marries a foreigner or the foreign woman who marries a Moaga subject retains her own nationality. Thus, marriage does not involve any loss of nationality. Customs may have been modified, but it is certain that even a Moaga woman who had lived abroad for a long time would soon resume the customs and practices of her own country. The same may be said of a foreign woman who might divorce her Moaga husband and return to her own land.

Naturalization. Since naturalization is unknown, children born in Mossi country of a foreign father and either a Moaga or a foreign mother remain foreign. Furthermore, since children take their father's nationality, a divorce will not affect their status.

II. Birth

842 Conception. The natives have no very well-defined idea of the process of conception. In their minds, the primary cause is God 716 (Wenam), Master of Heaven and Earth, who gives children. It seems, however, that Wendé or Wenam forces the kinkirsi (spirits) to change into a human egg when the sperm is transmitted at the time of ejaculation.

The kinkirsi are invisible beings said to resemble small children and who live near certain houses or [189] groves. Only a few favored persons can see them.

In the same connection, it is believed that ancestors or certain deceased relatives are reincarnated.

843 Pregnancy. It is known that complete cessation of menstruation and the development and darkening of the breasts are the signs of

- 843 pregnancy in a woman. It is also known that the woman will give birth in nine months, but since it is impossible to be sure of the date of delivery, the pregnant woman is watched over constantly and is under the surveillance of the old women. In a general way, nature is allowed to take its course, but some people prefer to consult the soothsayers and the priests and to give alms and sacrifices to avoid a miscarriage.

During pregnancy, women are forbidden to eat honey and, in general, any sweet foods.

Seguene-vando (from seguene, "to wear a skirt," and vando, "leaves, branches"). A few months after the cessation of menstruation, the pregnant woman is sent into the kim-dogo (hut of the kimsé, manes of the ancestors) at the home of the family elder. There she is completely disrobed, and branches are tied around her loins.

- 844 Delivery. Delivery takes place in the woman's own hut. There is no special preparation. [190] Old women who have had much practice help the mother while others heat water in which to cleanse the newborn child of all impurities.

No one except the old women is present during the delivery.

- [842] Women who have not yet borne children are sent away, and for good reason since the sight of the birth process might make them sterile.

Finally, if the afterbirth does not come out at the time of birth or soon after, there are certain special measures taken to hasten its emergence.

- 846 Three or four days after the delivery, depending on whether the child is a boy or a girl, the mother, who has so far remained indoors, goes out for the first time.

She carries a sickle to ward off ghosts and other evil spirits.

The new mother's co-wives and relatives bring her safandé (soap), kamé (karite butter), and kalgo (soumbala); others give her cowries. The father has a sheep or rooster killed and a millet cake prepared.

- [302] The woman who acted as midwife is sent a ball of sagbo (millet mush) and a chicken leg. The heads of the mother and child are partially shaved, and there is nothing else to do but to choose a name for the child. [191]

- 553 Choice of a name. Among the Mossi, a child's personal name depends on circumstances which preceded the birth or on an important

843 A woman's role is to bear children. When she knows that she is pregnant, she no longer consents to come to her husband, but she is careful not to inform him of her state; if she told him, the child would die. If her parents happen to pass away during her pregnancy, she does not go into mourning and does not attend the funeral. If she is newly wed and has not yet borne children, one of the other wives of her husband, or, if there are none, the husband's sister, comes at night to sprinkle the husband and wife with water. The young wife will henceforth call this woman her husband, prepare millet mush for her, and heat the water in which she washes. When the pregnancy begins to show, one of the wife's female relatives consults the sorcerer [782] to find out which sacrifice should be offered so that all will go well, but the husband is not informed of this consultation. Sometimes the sacrifice is repeated when the birth draws near. When the first baby 851 is born, the husband sends a child to his wife's relatives with a rooster or a hen depending on the newborn's sex. The child tosses the bird into the yard without saying a word and runs away; everybody understands.

847 /40/ A child born deformed, lame, or blind is done away with; it is simply drowned without further ado if considered incurable. In 845 olden times, twins were often drowned also because their birth entails 732 difficulties for the family, who must offer special sacrifices; some- 761 times only one of them was done away with. If they are spared and 753 die a natural death, the mother wears a small bell at her ankle until the anniversary of the death (kouéré). If the mother happens to die or the father becomes ill, the sorcerer need only say so and the children are put to death, because they are said to have caused the illness or death of their parents. A baby who could barely walk was once brought by relatives to the Koupéla Fathers. He had been born on a Friday and his mother had died; that was sufficient to call for his sacrifice. His relatives tried unsuccessfully to poison him; they exposed him for three days in the bush, and the child did not die. As a last resort they brought him to the missionaries, who hastened to shelter him. Children recognized as insane are abandoned in the bush where they die of hunger.

732 It is only fair to add, however, that these barbarous practices 845 reminiscent of Sparta are not invariably followed. Several lame and incurably ill children are carefully tended by their parents, and some twins born prior to the French occupation are alive and in good health.

776 kikiriga, in turn, are to ward off anything that might harm the crop,
241 birds, caterpillars, thieves, and the like, and to fill with millet a
granary of the size drawn on the ground with ashes at the time of
harvest. If the kikiriga has properly carried out his duties, he gets
another chicken when all the grain has been gathered in a heap.

776 Pregnant women are under the protection of a special kikiriga, and
[843] small children have one of their own to ward off illness and danger.
Do we not say ourselves that a special Providence watches over the
very young?

776 Actually, everyone has his kikiriga. Some have an evil one, and
828 those are the people who quarrel with everybody, the ones who are
never successful, whose livestock dies, for the kikirsi often kill the
goats, sheep, and horses that die of illness. Other people have a
[77] good kikiriga, and for them everything goes well; they were born under
a lucky star. These are the engaging, sweet, good-natured people
[513] who get rich and who have many children. When a Mossi lies down
to sleep in his hut, he rests his head on a stone or a small mound of
beaten earth. This is where his kikiriga dwells, and from time to
time, especially when he feels the need for special protection, he
[782] sacrifices a guinea hen or sometimes even a goat, with the understand-
ing that the spirit will chase away all fellow spirits who might want
to harm him and will avert all illness and all danger from his path.

/83/ The tangandé is a spirit who has the shape of an animal and
776 who is regarded as the protector of a village. The term is also ex-
778 tended to designate the spirit's place of residence, usually the sacred
825 grove but sometimes a mere stone or even an open space. The
tangandé may be a crocodile, a boa, a leopard, a turtle, a deer,
a hare, etc. The animal is sacred to the whole village and may not
be killed in the sacred grove, but it may be killed elsewhere, even
a short distance from the thicket.

776 The tangandé is a guardian spirit because it protects men and sends
755 its servants to accompany the village people on trips when they re-
quest it to do so. The natives incessantly turn to it for protection,
and the sorcerers incessantly refer those who consult them to the
tangandé to obtain cures and to request the release of souls held captive
776 by evil sorcerers. When someone dies, sacrifices are made to the
782 tangandé with requests to protect the survivors and to ward off illness.
When souls leave the body during sleep, they often go to the sacred
[774] grove. Anyone may sacrifice to the tangandé and in the tangandé.

- 000 16. Circumcision.
 17. Excision.
 18. After the circumcision.
 19. Emancipation and coming of age.
 20. Guardianship.
 21. Adoption.
 22. Interdiction.

Let us begin with filiation.

848 Filiation. — "The Mossi," says Vadier, "distinguish three types of filiation: (1) legitimate filiation; (2) natural filiation; and (3) filiation from incest.

As for filiation from adultery, it is regarded exactly in the same manner as natural filiation.

• [843] The period of gestation is believed to be from seven to twelve months. A child conceived outside this lapse of time is regarded as a natural child. Moreover, a woman need only tell her husband that the child she is carrying in her womb is not his and he will disown it.

When the illegitimate child or one born of adultery reaches the age of three or six (depending on its sex), it is entrusted to its natural father. In spite of this separation, the child retains its rights of inheritance from its mother.

848 Filiation from incest does not exist, or rather there is not enough time for obligations and rights to be created. Indeed, according to 847 a barbarous custom, the child born of incest is put to death immediately after birth by the women who assisted with the delivery.

835 Incest rules apply between kin of any degree in the ascending and descending lines: sister and brother, uncle and niece, nephew and aunt, and all their relatives in the direct ascending and descending lines; father-in-law and daughter-in-law; son-in-law and mother-in-law. /251/

684 When incest occurs, the guilty pair are driven from their families and from Yatenga, and the naba confiscates all their property."

843 Theory of birth. — The Mossi believe that when a woman is 775 pregnant, the soul of an ancestor has returned within her. We shall speak of this animistic explanation of birth later under "Religion" /not translated/.

In fact, resemblances between the child and some previously known ancestor are pointed out as often as possible, and it is said that this particular ancestor was reincarnated within the woman.

842 How children are welcomed. — The Mossi are very happy to have children and want by all means to have some. This is indeed to their full advantage, since children work from the age of seven or eight, since they make sacrifices for their parents when the latter are dead, and since the daughters, by marrying, bring in gifts for the family. The more children one has, the happier one is.

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789 "Under these circumstances," says Vadier, "a barren woman is very poorly regarded by her husband and not greatly esteemed by her neighbors. To overcome this sterility when it occurs, both spouses appeal to the gods. They both go to the tengasoba, the religious chief of the village, with a chicken, a goat, or a sheep, according to their means. The tengasoba cuts the animal's throat on a special stone, collects its blood, and boils it in a vessel along with various tree barks which have certain properties.

[431] "This concoction is then given to the woman, who must mix it with her sarabou. If the spouses later have a child, they must, under threat of calling forth the vengeance of the divinity (the Earth, in this case), offer the tengasoba a gift of 3,000 cowries if they had a boy or 4,000 cowries if they had a girl.

"The tengasoba also overcome sterility by cutting the animal's throat in the sacred grove (kango)."

847 Abortions. — Abortions nevertheless occur. Sometimes Mossi women cause an abortion in the event of an illegitimate pregnancy which occurred in the husband's absence. In addition, abortions are rather frequent among unmarried mothers. To conceal their lapse, [791] they appeal to the tipa or timisoba (makers of charms, medicines, and poisons) who give them a special brew of which they hold the secret.

[586] These practices are, of course, very poorly regarded by the Mossi. Married women who resort to them are turned out by their husband's. In addition, if a woman dies as the result of an abortion, her husband is likely to manifest joy and to state that the woman received a just punishment for her transgression. Finally, in former times after the death of the guilty woman, the husband would go to the Moro Naba and denounce her lover to him. The naba confiscated all the lover's property.

● 843 Childbirth. — Among wealthy Mossi, the pregnant woman is treated with a certain regard. She does not work after the third month /252/ of pregnancy if this is her first, or after the sixth month if she has

- 843 already borne children. Among the common people, the woman works up to the time of her delivery. Like other Sudanese women, the Mossi woman is inured to the pains of childbirth and devoid of any nervousness.

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787 When their wives are pregnant, the Mossi often go to consult the baga /sorcerer/ to find out what sacrifices should be made so the event will turn out well. As he is wont to do, the baga indicates such-and-such a sacrifice. He also prognosticates on request whether to expect a boy or a girl.

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755 If the pregnant woman has been frightened by an evil spirit (kinkirga), she summons the tipa who washes her body with a specially prepared liquid or merely administers violent blows on her head with takarané (cowhide sandals of which we spoke earlier /not translated/) to drive out the evil spirit.

844 The Mossi woman may give birth only in her own hut. She would consider it a shameful thing if the child were born in her husband's private hut.

When a woman gives birth, she makes a confession to the old women who assist her, because she fears too much suffering or an unsuccessful delivery if she does not confess the faults she has committed. The old women go and repeat them to the husband, who says, "That's all right, I knew it all," and forgives her. In short, the torments of childbirth are put to use by the old women to procure a confession.

There are midwives among the Mossi (in Mossi, pougourorosa). They are paid by the husband. However, they do not receive a salary, properly speaking, but rather a gift (a piece of salt, a skirt cloth, etc.). If nothing is given to them, they cannot and do not make any demands.

In addition to the midwife, the old women of the compound, quarter, or village come and help the patient.

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576 For the delivery itself, the Mossi woman goes down on hands and knees, her arms stretched out upon the ground, her body slightly inclined from head to hips, in the posture ordinarily used to salute or to remain before a chief. The midwife stays behind her.

844 When the child is born, the women present heat up a very strong concoction with red pepper, soumbara /locust bean/, etc. The woman is made to swallow this, and it is supposed to foster the emission of blood and all other impure matter. Then she is washed with warm water. Her loins are also rubbed vigorously so that the strain undergone in childbirth will not be felt there later. Likewise,

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fied his sexual desires. Since these women were in the monarch's favor, they were better dressed than the other wives and received more attention from him. The dogunba generally cultivated a large field in common with the aid of the palace retainers, but some insisted on cultivating their own fields instead. Like the other wives, the dogunba usually lived in huts of their own. Childless women sometimes shared the same hut until one of them became pregnant and had to set up a hut for herself and her child.

Those wives who lived in special villages under the supervision of eunuchs rarely went to the palace. Usually, they were past childbearing age or had lost favor with the monarch. They cultivated plots of land, spun cotton, and prepared locust-bean flour, locust-bean "balls," and shea butter. They kept a part of the produce for their own use and sent the remainder to the palace stores; the same arrangement obtained for all three categories of palace wives.

The Mogho Naba's heir was usually born while his father was still Crown Prince. He was never born in his father's compound because, unlike other Mossi women, the wife of a Mogho Naba or Crown Prince returned to her father's house for confinement. As soon as she announced her pregnancy, the Pughtiema or one of the older wives held a ceremony to notify the ancestors. Once the rite had been completed, the wife was sent to her relatives for fear that she might be harmed by her less fortunate co-wives. If the child was a boy, the ruler or Crown Prince was notified immediately, because the important privileges of a first-born hinged upon this notification. Since several wives of the Mogho Naba might be pregnant at the same time and errors might be made about the onset and duration of pregnancy, primogeniture had to be established immediately to forestall dynastic conflicts. For example, it is commonly believed that the present Doulougou Naba was born several days before Mogho Naba Sagha II (1942-57) but was deprived of the nam because the messenger who brought news of his birth reached Mogho Naba Kom after the messenger who announced Sagha's birth. Undoubtedly, such allegations were sometimes used to foster and support dynastic rebellions.

So strong was the fear that the most likely heir to the nam would be harmed by jealous co-wives that the child and his mother never returned to the palace except for brief visits on ceremonial occasions. The young prince remained with his mother's relatives and was guarded and educated by servants sent from the palace. If his father was on the throne at Ouagadougou when the boy reached the age of ten, he was formally installed as chief of Djiba district, the traditional seat of the Crown Prince. If his father was not on the throne, the boy remained with his mother's relatives and went to Djiba when his grandfather died and his father was installed as Mogho Naba.